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SUBJECT: GOC CAPTURES ELN COMMANDER "PABLITO"

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer - Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Colombian authorities captured Carlos Marin Guarin (aka "Pablito") a commander of the country's second largest terrorist group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), on January 7. Defense Minister Santos said Pablito was the key figure in the ELN's military structure, adding that his capture removed an important obstacle to the GOC-ELN peace talks. Still, sources close to the ELN and the peace talks told us Pablito's capture would not have a major impact on the stalled GOC-ELN talks. Many hard-liners remain, and the ELN's narcotrafficking, leadership weaknesses, and recent rapprochement with the FARC would continue to complicate efforts to move ahead. End Summary.

GOC Captures ELN Hard-liner

¶2. (U) Pablito, commander of three of the ELN's seven fronts, was captured in Bogota on January 7, while reorganizing the group's military capabilities. He was wanted by authorities on numerous charges, including: the murder of a prominent Catholic bishop, kidnappings, and more than 200 bombings of Occidental Petroleum's Cano-Limon oil pipeline. Though not on the GOC's most-wanted terrorist list, Army Commander General Mario Montoya said Pablito's arrest was the result of months of intelligence work tracking the terrorist leader.

¶3. (S) The Embassy's Intelligence Fusion Cell (EIFC) worked with the GOC to track Pablito prior to his arrival in Bogota. Legatt confirms that a sealed U.S. indictment against Pablito is pending for the 2003 kidnapping of two U.S. citizens.

An Obstacle to Peace

¶4. (U) The GOC made a media show of the capture, claiming it had removed a key terrorist leader and one of the ELN's staunchest opponents to peace talks with the GOC. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos told the media Pablito was, "the ELN's most belligerent opponent of the peace process... and

the most important ELN ringleader captured in history." He claimed that Pablito had on numerous occasions "prevented the ELN's central command (COCE) from signing a peace treaty with the government." Analyst Pablo Casas of the Security and Democracy Foundation added, "The ELN was having a lot of trouble internally, in terms of getting everyone on board with the peace process. Marin's capture removes one of those roadblocks."

Others Downplay Pablito's Importance to Talks

¶5. (C) ELN peace process guarantor Mortz Akerman -- who met the ELN commander -- told us Pablito was an important military player and a "negative influence" in the peace talks, but said the GOC's claims were overblown. Pablito was an obstacle to peace talks, but there were many others like him in the ELN. His capture, Akerman concluded, would not likely have a noticeable impact on the stalled ELN peace process.

¶6. (C) Catholic Priest Dario Echeverri agreed Pablito's capture would not have much impact on GOC-ELN peace talks. Echeverri, who discussed the peace process with Pablito after ELN-GOC peace talks last August, said Pablito questioned the talks' purpose and appeared committed to continuing the fight. Still, Echeverri said the main obstacle to the peace process was not Pablito, but the ELN's growing dependence on narcotrafficking, lack of COCE control over key ELN Fronts, and the ELN leaders' unwillingness to pursue talks opposed by the FARC. Echeverri added that the ELN, like the FARC, owes a substantial debt to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. He expects Chavez to use his influence to further complicate any GOC-ELN talks.
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